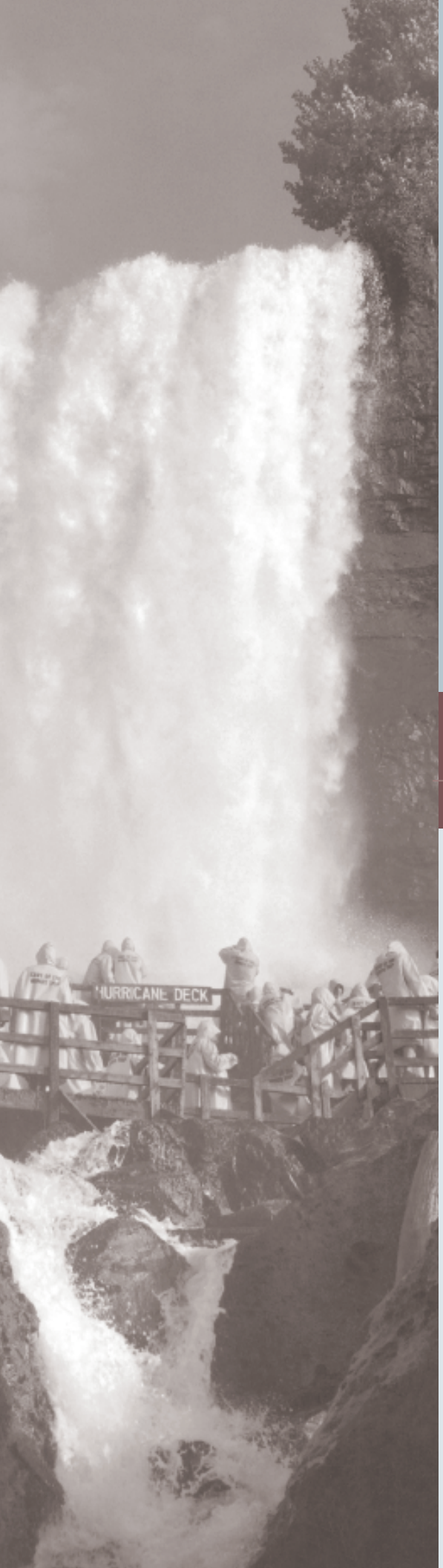


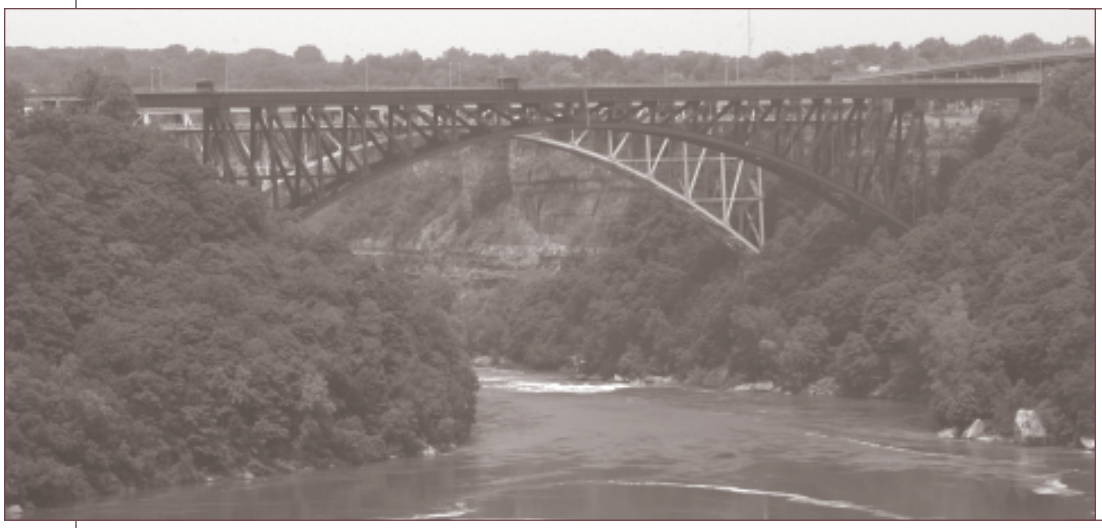
Niagara

NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA STUDY

Dear Friends,

We are pleased to offer you this newsletter about the National Park Service's Niagara National Heritage Area Study. As we inform you of the progress of our study, we invite you to share the news with your friends and colleagues. We applaud your local and regional efforts to protect the resources and share the stories that define the Niagara Region.

This newsletter offers background on the study, describes our preliminary findings as presented at our November 5th public meeting, and summarizes the public comments received at that meeting. We welcome your thoughts and comments on any aspect of the study. For more information, please visit our project website at **www.niagaraheritagestudy.org.**



View to Whirlpool Rapids Bridge from the Niagara Gorge Trail

Photo Courtesy of NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In October 2002, Congress passed the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area Study Act, (Public Law 107-256) directing the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study of the suitability and feasibility of establishing a Niagara Falls National Heritage Area. The National Park Service is responsible for conducting the study and submitting a report to Congress. In developing such a study, the National Park Service undertakes a professional evaluation process, ending with a range of options. When the study is finished, the National Park Service publishes a report and the Secretary of the Interior sends it to Congress with a recommendation. The National Park Service does not designate heritage areas — it is Congress that can designate a national heritage area.

What is a National Heritage Area?

A National Heritage Area is a place designated by Congress where natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. A heritage area designation offers national recognition for a region and increases awareness of its particular qualities and special places among visitors and residents alike.

Currently there are 24 federally designated heritage areas nation-wide. Two of those areas are right here in New York State — the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor and the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Corridor. Often, heritage areas are organized around a prominent geographic feature such as a river or canal like the Erie Canalway. Others are organized around certain themes like the Motor Cities–Automobile Heritage Area in Michigan.

No two heritage areas are alike. Management of each area differs in accordance with specific regional needs and conditions as does the role of the National Park Service. Some of these areas are managed by federal commissions and others are managed by non-profit organizations or state agencies. In some heritage areas, the National Park Service provides significant staff support and assumes a large role in the day to day activities of the heritage area. In others, the National Park Service role may be limited to providing a small amount of technical assistance only as requested by the management entity.

The current standard for funding allows for each heritage area to be eligible for up to $1 million per year over a 15 year period — not to exceed a total of $10 million. This money requires a 50 per cent non-federal match on the part of the heritage area. Many existing heritage areas have had great success leveraging these dollars to raise more money from other public agencies and private sources, averaging a return of $9 dollars for every $1 federal dollar. The key to the success of any heritage area is a high level of local commitment and support.

To learn more about the 24 national heritage areas, visit the National Park Service's Heritage Area website: **www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas**.

Study Criteria

The Niagara Falls National Heritage Area Study Act specifies that the following National Park Service heritage area criteria be used in evaluating the study area for such a designation.

1. The area has an assemblage of natural, historic, or cultural resources that together represent distinctive aspects of American heritage worthy of recognition, conservation, interpretation, and continuing use, and are best managed as such an assemblage, through partnerships among public and private entities, and by combining diverse and sometimes noncontiguous resources and active communities
2. The area reflects traditions, customs, beliefs, and folk life that are a valuable part of the nation's story
3. The area provides outstanding opportunities to conserve natural, cultural, historic, and/or scenic features
4. The area provides outstanding recreational and educational opportunities
5. The area includes resources that are important to the identified theme or themes of the area and retain a degree of integrity capable of supporting interpretation
6. Residents, business interests, non-profit organizations, and governments within the proposed area that are involved in the planning, have developed a conceptual financial plan that outlines the roles for all participants including the federal government, and have demonstrated support for designation of the area
7. The proposed management entity and units of government supporting the designation are willing to commit to working in partnership to develop the heritage area
8. The proposal is consistent with continued economic activity in the area
9. A conceptual boundary map has been reviewed by the public and
10. The management entity proposed to plan and implement the project is described

PUBLIC MEETING – NOVEMBER 5, 2003

(Prepared By Bradshaw Hovey, Urban Design Project/University of Buffalo (SUNY))

About a hundred people came together at the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center in Niagara Falls on November 5, 2003 to talk about the potential for a nationally-designated Niagara Heritage Area. The meeting began with an introduction and overview of the study by National Park Service community planners Ellen Carlson and Jim O'Connell and proceeded to a discussion of the current study area, potential themes for a National Heritage Area, and things that are needed to help such an initiative succeed.

Summary of Public Comments

Comments about the current definition of the **study area** clustered around two dominant ideas. One was that Niagara Falls, the cataract, and Niagara Falls, the city, must be the strong core of any heritage area program. The other main idea was that the study area should also be expanded to include some more of Buffalo and Erie County. Still others suggested that the appropriate frame in which to tell the story of the region is bi-nationally and from lake to lake. Several suggested that the waterfront should define the area and organize the interpretive program.

Participants suggested a broad range of **themes** for heritage area interpretation, especially those of hydro-electric power generation and industries that were made possible by it, including grain trans-shipment, steel-making, and chemicals. Others referenced the importance of transportation and the engineering of early bridges. Other participants noted the centrality of the beauty of the Falls, the rapids, and the gorge as well as other natural resources including a distinct biosphere, old growth forests, species habitat, agriculture, and old industrial lands that could be restored. Several participants suggested structuring sub-themes around the idea of Niagara Falls as a place where great ideas collided — the progress of technology and the profundity of nature.

Other suggested themes included the history of American Indian inhabitants of the region including the Tuscaroras; the political and military history of Niagara including the Loyalist story and the War of 1812; the story

of explorers LaSalle and Father Hennepin and their boat, the *Griffon*; the history of the region's many ethnic communities; recreation; tourism; and "Niagara as the cross-border capital of North America." Some participants suggested water as a theme that could unite a full range of sub-themes.

Participants also identified a wide range of **needs** for the development of a National Heritage Area. Many were concerned about transportation to cope with traffic, limiting parking, accommodating bicycles, improving bridge crossings, and integrating all transportation needs in a regional plan. Others emphasized the need to promote tourism readiness including the development of four-season attractions, tourism development programs, and even a good place to eat lunch near the Falls, all with an eye toward keeping tourists in the area longer. It was suggested that programs like Doors Open — a binational Niagara Region event — were important examples to consider.

Other needs identified included the improvement of heritage interpretation relying on help from local historians and the National Park Service, focusing on development of a hub attraction like the Niagara Experience Center, and improving "storytelling" overall. Still others emphasized the need to preserve and restore natural assets including riparian areas, Prospect Park, Goat Island, the lower gorge trail, and even allowing the full flow of water over the falls on major holidays. Securing adequate federal funding for a designated heritage area was also raised as an issue.

In a less tangible way, participants said the heritage area effort needs to promote a collaborative spirit. It would also help to integrate land ownership and management in the gorge. Participants also noted the need for a better public awareness of the uniqueness of the Niagara Region and its assets and the generation of greater local pride in the region's communities.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Study Area

Congress defined the study area in P.L. 107-256 as "the lands in Niagara County, New York, along and in the vicinity of the Niagara River." Given this legislative direction and acknowledging that Niagara Falls, its rapids and its gorge are the region's centerpiece, the study team defined a primary study area encompassing the towns of Porter, Lewiston, Niagara, and Wheatfield; the cities of Niagara Falls and North Tonawanda, and the villages of Lewiston and Youngstown.

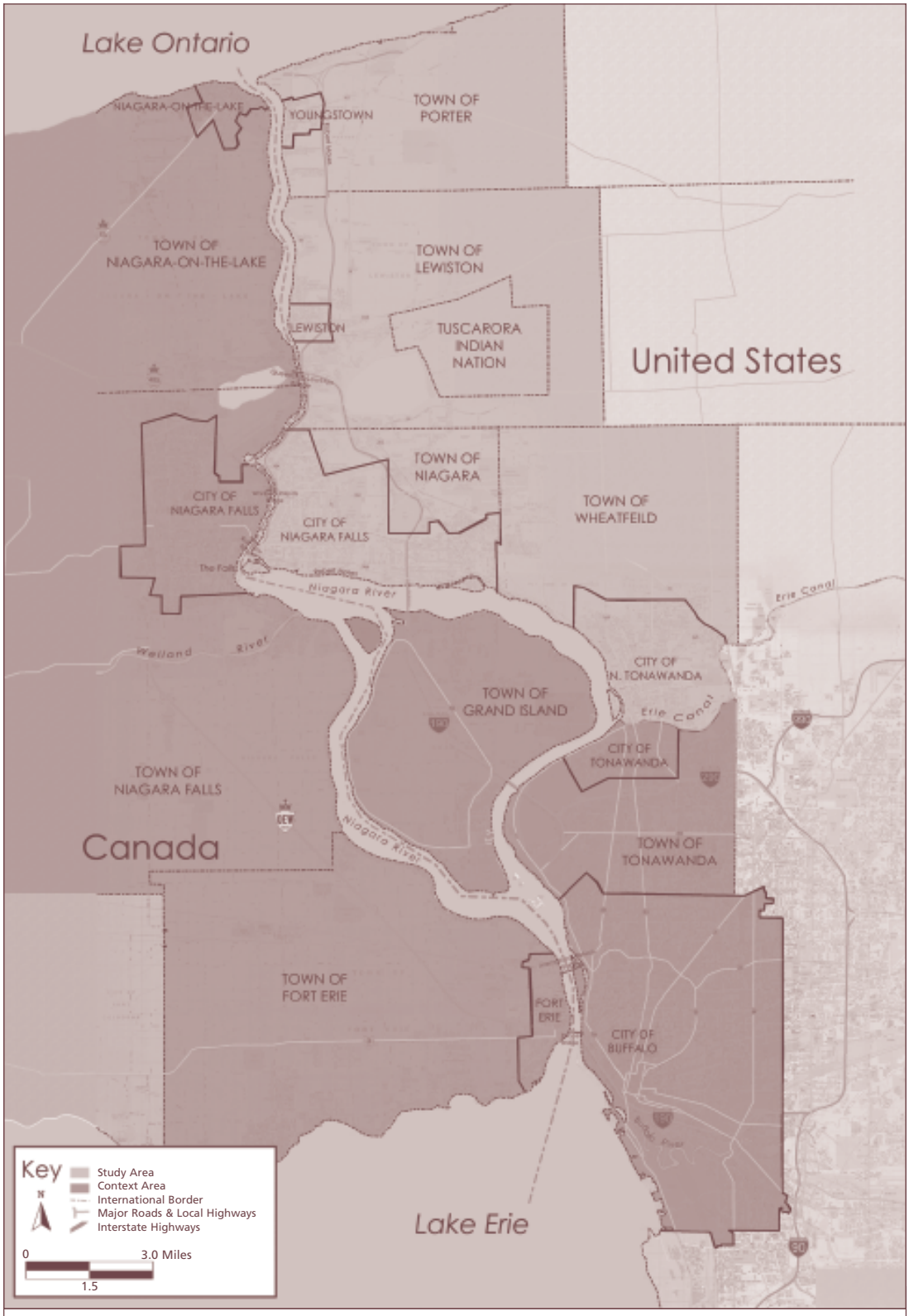
It is evident, however, that this area only addresses the lower Niagara River — the upper Niagara River is located in Erie County adjacent to the cities of Tonawanda and Buffalo. Further, half of Niagara Falls, its rapids and its gorge are located within the Niagara region of the province of Ontario, Canada. To consider the primary study area in a comprehensive manner required that we understand the region in its entirety. So a larger area has been defined as the "context area" for the purposes of this study. The context area encompasses the lands in Erie County, New York that are along and in the vicinity of the Niagara River as well as those similarly located in the municipalities of the Niagara region of Ontario, Canada.

Themes

In developing themes, the study team first considered work previously completed by the binational forum convened by the Urban Design Project at University of Buffalo and the Waterfront Regeneration Trust of Toronto in their Rethinking the Niagara Frontier series of publications. The team also conducted a reconnaissance-level survey of natural, cultural, historic, scenic, and recreational resources within the primary study area. Based on an analysis of this information, the team identified the themes that were the most cohesive, pervasive, and distinctive in relation to the identified resources. The four themes are meant to be broad and comprehensive so that they are able to capture a wide range of pertinent stories and individual sites.

Natural Phenomenon

At Niagara we encounter a natural phenomenon overwhelming in its magnitude and deeply embedded in popular consciousness. In any attempt to understand the distinctive characteristics of the region, the primary focus must be on the natural resource itself. Centered on the Falls, its rapids and gorge, this theme embraces the natural features and history that are at the very foundation of the Niagara Region and have influenced its development. This is a descriptive, physical theme, which presents a basis in nature for the dramatic spectacle that visitors



STUDY AREA

Niagara National Heritage Area Study

The Urban Design Project
School of Architecture and Planning
University at Buffalo
The State University of New York

come to see. Like the Grand Canyon, the evidence is easily discernible and the natural processes are still active. This theme offers the opportunity to make thematic links to other portions of the Niagara Escarpment and, indeed, throughout the Great Lakes region.

Exhibits and dramatic views are offered at the Niagara Power Project's Visitor Center in Lewiston

Photo courtesy of New York Power Authority

Recreation & Tourism

Since it first became known to Europeans through the 17th century accounts of Father Louis Hennepin (a Franciscan friar who accompanied the French explorer LaSalle in his reconnaissance of the Great Lakes Region), European colonists and their American descendants beheld the Falls with awe, perceiving it as an outstanding expression of the sublime. With Niagara firmly established as an extraordinary phenomenon, it became a destination of travelers. The history of Niagara Falls followed the course of tourism development in the United States. After being a pastime for the leisured elite before the Civil War, tourism became an activity of the emerging middle class. Their interest in pleasure travel was enhanced by the construction of a vast national railroad network. Changes in the workplace, as well as the advent of the automobile, brought an even more diverse cross-section of the visiting public to Niagara Falls.

As a parallel to its 19th century development as a tourist attraction, Niagara emerged as an important battle-ground between radically divergent visions of the value and meaning of the Falls, and by extension all natural wonders. Should these resources be captured and exploited for financial gain or should they be held in public trust to protect them for future generations? Ultimately the conflict led to the establishment of New York State's Niagara Reservation, a notable landmark in the national preservation movement. In the 1880s Frederick Law Olmsted designed a plan for the reservation that still informs its management.

Power & Industry

The generation and distribution of power from Niagara Falls is notable for its magnitude, its innovation, its elaborate planning, and the element of bi-national cooperation. Contributing resources include present and former generating plants including the National Historic Landmark Adams Transformer Plant, power canals, reservoirs, as well as thematic links to industries powered by the Niagara plants. Although the power of the Falls had been used to a limited degree before then, technical advances in the 1890s (such as the practical use of alternating current) made it possible to truly harness the Falls. The triumph of this unique endeavor was celebrated at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition which, though held in Buffalo, was powered and inspired by Niagara.

Borderland/Border Crossing

Whereas the preceding themes would be applicable even if the Niagara region lay entirely within one nation, this final theme depends on the accident of history that placed an international boundary down the center of the Niagara River. The nature of this cross boundary area has influenced many facets of life on the Niagara Frontier including military activity, transportation, and American Indian and colonial settlement. The most obvious reminder of this theme lies in the evidence of military activity. Fort Niagara is the most conspicuous resource on the US side. The last formal military action ended in 1815, but defensive preparations and mutual wariness persisted through much of the 19th century.

The area was an important passage to the Great Lakes and the interior of the continent and contains resources that express its character as both barrier and gateway. The boundary influenced transportation developments, as each nation created their own transportation facilities — separate and distinct from the other (e.g. the Welland and Erie Canals).

Although war between the US and Canada has become inconceivable, the international border has remained consequential. Legal and social differences between the two nations in the period before the American Civil War

made the Niagara Frontier important in the operation of the Underground Railroad. In the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, the border theme is as current as today's headlines.

Needs Assessment

Through the review of existing studies and plans, and interviews with park managers, local elected officials, tourism and revitalization interests, and other local stakeholders, the study team developed a list of perceived needs. The needs are described on a region-wide basis as well as for specific areas or interest groups.

Region-Wide

Tourism Development

Regional tourism development requires a clear, strategic vision as well as strong leadership and sustained coordination among managers of parks and operators of tourist attractions and amenities. It is also important to identify and nurture mutually beneficial binational opportunities in the Niagara Region. Finally, the study team has noted a need to develop the region's visitor infrastructure, including but not limited to marketing, signage, tourist amenities, and alternative transportation.

Resource Management

Resource management also requires a clear vision, strong leadership, and coordination among resource managers to ensure long term success. Recognized resource management needs include improvements to and expansion of existing trails along the Niagara Gorge. The possibility of a Lake to Lake greenway should be considered. The study team also learned that interpretive signage and programming could use improvement — particularly in interpreting the region's history. Recreational opportunities along the Robert Moses Parkway could be maximized, and programmatic and physical links could be developed with related areas such as Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor and Niagara Falls, Canada. Finally, the study team was also made aware of the overarching need for more support to protect and preserve the region's internationally-recognized natural resources and its important historic and cultural resources.

City of Niagara Falls, New York

Needs identified by the city of Niagara Falls revolved around downtown revitalization and fell into two major categories: city/park interface and tourism development. Under city/park interface the needs identified included enhancing opportunities to create links among tourist attractions and amenities as well as to expand partnerships between the City and New York State's Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. Also under this category, the need to minimize the physical impacts of the Robert Moses Parkway was expressed.

Under tourism development, city representatives expressed their desire to see the City as a regional tourism hub with a centralized visitor orientation function and improved visitor amenities (e.g. informational signage, restaurants)

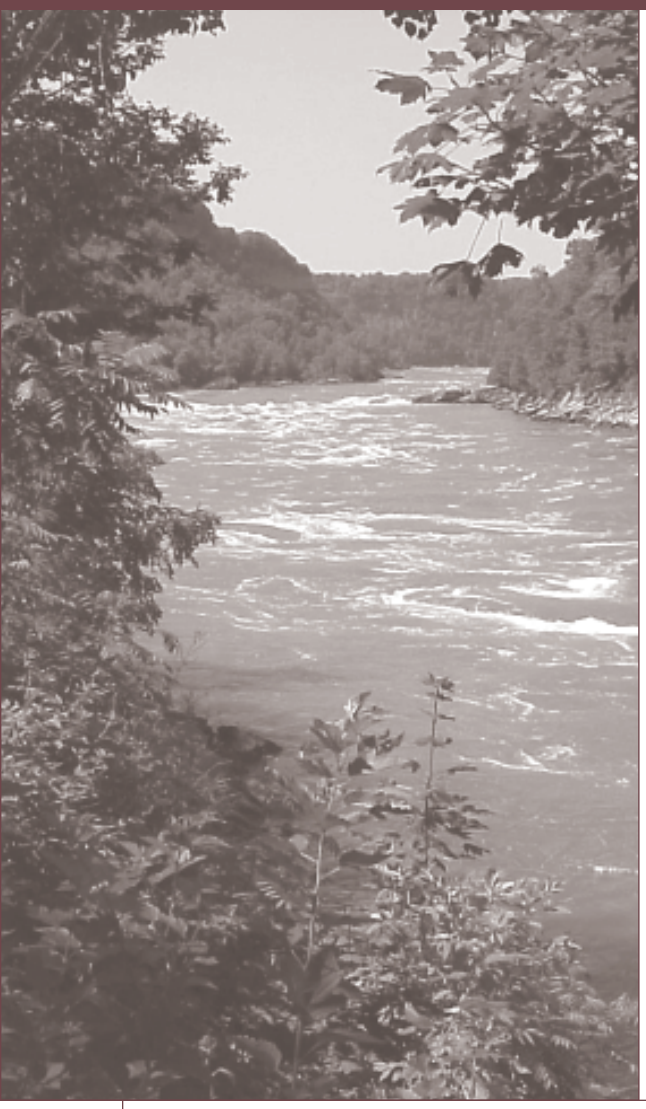
Porter/Youngstown/Lewiston

For these northern communities, the most significant needs include maintaining physical, programmatic, and marketing links to the City of Niagara Falls; protecting their rural, village character, and making the public aware of what they have to offer residents and visitors alike.

New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation (OPRHP)

OPRHP has expressed its need to continue making substantial capital improvements particularly within the Niagara Reservation and along the gorge trail. This includes such projects as the restoration of Goat Island, work on the Niagara Gorge Trail, and rehabilitation of the Three Sisters bridges. They have also identified the need for improved interpretive signage and programming at many of the Niagara region's state parks and historic sites.

Under the category of tourism development, OPRHP would like to expand public awareness of resources beyond the Falls; to increase domestic visitation as well as foster repeat visitation; and to increase opportunities for partnership with other regional initiatives (e.g. Doors Open Niagara).



SUMMARY OF NEXT STEPS/SCHEDULE

MILESTONE	TARGET DATES
Stakeholders meetings	On-going
Focus group meetings re: preliminary proposals	May 2004
Draft Study Report on public review	August 2004
Public Meeting re: draft study	September 2004
Final Report to Congress	February 2005

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK

We welcome your thoughts and suggestions. If you would like additional information or have any ideas or concerns that you would like to share, please do not hesitate to contact us or visit our website at **www.niagaraheritagestudy.org** and register your comments online.

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